CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Triangle Communications Easement Application A portion of the Big Timber FTTH upgrade project
Proposed Implementation Date:	Summer 2023
Proponent:	Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association, Inc. (TTCA, Inc.)
Location:	NE¼NE¼, SE¼NE¼, NE¼SE¼, and Lot 1 of Section 16, Township 1 South, Range 14 East (Common Schools Trust)
County:	Sweet Grass County

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The proponent, Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association, Inc. (TTCA, Inc.), is applying for a new 20' wide easement in order to install a fiber optic telecommunications line located in the NE¼NE¼, SE¼NE¼, NE¼SE¼, and Lot 1 of Section 16, Township 1 South, Range 14 East, as shown in 'Exhibit A.' The proposed route the amendment will allow the proponent to add an additional line within their granted corridor in order to install a high-speed fiber optic telecommunication line.

The easement part of a larger project where TTCA, Inc. is upgrading, replacing, and installing new fiber optics to portions of their telecommunications lines in rural Sweet Grass County. The project consists of replacing outdated existing copper services with fiber optic lines to provide Fiber to the Home (FTTH) service in remote areas.

The proposed 20' right-of-way will encumber ±2.05-acres of State Trust Land

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.

No formal public scoping was performed by DNRC for this proposed project. The lessee for the State Trust Land is Whistle Creek Partners LLC and a signed Lessee Settlement of Damages was obtained.

2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

The proponent will secure all necessary permits prior to construction.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Proposed Alternative: Issue the new 20' wide easement to Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association, Inc. (TTCA, Inc.) for the installation of fiber optic cable across Section 16, Township 1 South, Range 14 East in Sweet Grass County.

No Action Alternative: Deny the new 20' wide easement to Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association, Inc. (TTCA, Inc.) for the installation of fiber optic cable across Section 16, Township 1 South, Range 14 East in Sweet Grass County.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:

Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify any cumulative impacts to soils.

The route proposed in the easement generally follows a public road, State Highway 298. The land area is categorically considered Great Plains Mixedgrass Prairies interspersed with small portions of Big Sagebrush Steppe and according to the NRCS Soil Survey, the area consists of a gravelly loam soil type with small portions of clay loam across the general easement area. The fiber optic cable is proposed to be installed using the direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the cable, covers that cable and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless. Based on the proposed action and relatively short disturbance time for cable installation, no significant adverse impacts to geology and soils are expected by implementing the proposed action.

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:

Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify cumulative effects to water resources.

The proposed easement does cross the dry creek bed of Whistle Creek as well as Ellison irrigation ditch. Whistle Creek is an old dry creek bed that no longer runs except for the occasional runoff from heavy precipitation, and the Ellison irrigation ditch only operates during the cropland growing season. The project will likely take place while there is no surface water present in either source. No significant adverse impacts to water quality, quantity or distribution are anticipated by implementing the proposed action.

6. AIR QUALITY:

What pollutants or particulate would be produced? Identify air quality regulations or zones (e.g. Class I air shed) the project would influence. Identify cumulative effects to air quality.

There may be short-term isolated impacts from the equipment exhaust that is used to install the fiber optic cable. No significant adverse impacts to air quality are expected by implementing the proposed action.

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:

What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify cumulative effects to vegetation.

The land classification is considered Great Plains Mixed Grass Prairies interspersed with small portions of Big Sagebrush Steppe. Grasses typically comprise the greatest canopy cover with Western Wheatgrass being the dominant species. The cable is proposed to be installed using direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the cable, covers that cable and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless. The area disturbed by the trenching activity and from vehicle travel could have short term impacts on vegetation.

The existing easement corridor generally follows an existing state highway that has been previously disturbed. No significant long term adverse impacts to vegetative cover, quantity or quality are expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:

Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

A variety of big game (mainly antelope and deer), small mammals, raptors, and songbirds may traverse the subject section. The proposed project activities could temporarily disrupt wildlife movement and patterns during construction. The proposed alternative generally follows and existing state highway. Due to the relatively short project duration and nature no significant adverse impacts to terrestrial, avian and aquatic life and habitats are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

No significant or long-term adverse impacts to terrestrial, avian and aquatic life and habitats are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:

Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

A search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program database indicated the following species of concern in the proposed sections:

- **B - Golden Eagle** *(Aquila chrysaetos),* **Greater Sage-Grouse** *(Centrocercus urophasianus)*
- **M – Grizzly Bear** *(Ursus arctos horribilis)*

Along with the species listed, Bat Roosts (Non-cave) have been discovered in the area. There are also potential species of concern that have the possibility of having habitats or being observed in the surrounding area.

The proponent has completed consultation with the Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program due to the parcel being located in Sage Grouse General Habitat and has provided copy of the consultation letter to the DNRC Trust Lands Management Division. Aquatic species of concern were noted in the data base, however, Whistle Creek is an old dry creek bed that no longer runs except for occasional runoff from heavy precipitation, and the Ellison irrigation ditch only operates during the cropland growing season. The project will likely take place while there is no surface water present in either source.

None of the species listed above were observed on the parcel, but habitats are within the general area.

Due to the nature of the proposed action, the installation of underground fiber optic cable, following a state highway and previously disturbed areas, it is not expected to have a significant long-term effect on any of the species identified on or around this parcel. The surface disturbance will be temporary and located parallel and adjacent to an existing state highway.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

A Class III cultural and paleontological resources inventory was conducted of the area of potential effect on state land. Despite a detailed examination, no cultural or fossil resources were identified in the easement corridor. No additional archaeological or paleontological investigative work is recommended. Additionally, during a site visit on 4 April 2023 by Area Planner Joe Holzwarth, a visual inspection was performed, and no cultural or paleontological resources were identified.

The proposed project will have *No Effect* to *Antiquities* as defined under the Montana State Antiquities Act. Formal reports of findings are available through the DNRC and the Montana State Historic Preservation Officer.

11. AESTHETICS:

Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature, or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify cumulative effects to aesthetics.

The proposed alternative would result in the installation of underground fiber optic cable adjacent and parallel to an existing public road. Once the easement areas are rehabbed from the installation disturbance, the only indication that there is an underground fiber optic line would be from any above-ground warning markers. Therefore, no significant adverse impact to aesthetics is expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:

Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify cumulative effects to environmental resources.

No significant adverse impacts to environmental resources of land, water, air or energy are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:

List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.

There are no other known studies or future actions planned for this Trust land parcel.

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:

Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

No significant adverse impacts to human health and safety would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

The location of the easement does not traverse any crop lands. No significant adverse impacts to industrial, commercial and agricultural activities and production would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:

Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to the employment market.

The proposed action will have no significant impact on the quantity and distribution of employment.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:

Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

The proposed action will have no adverse impact on tax revenue.

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:
Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services

The implementation of the proposed alternative will not generate any additional demands on governmental services.

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:
List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.

Implementation of the proposed alternative will not conflict with any locally adopted plans. Any further development of the State land could require additional local government review.

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:
Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

The subject parcel has legal public access. The project consists of installing a fiber optic line along a state highway. In addition, the project will only last a short duration. The implementation of the proposed alternative is not expected to have a long-term adverse impact on recreational use of the Trust land parcel.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:
Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify cumulative effects to population and housing.

No significant adverse impacts to density and distribution of population and housing would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:
Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

There are no native, unique or traditional lifestyles or communities in the vicinity that would be impacted by the proposed alternative.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:
How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

The proposed alternative will not have a significant adverse impact on cultural uniqueness or diversity.

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:
Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

The Common Schools Trust Permanent Fund will benefit by getting a one-time fee of $2,460.00 from Project Telephone for the new ±2.05-acre easement.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	**Name:**	Zach Huyser	**Date:**	10 April 2023
	Title:	Land Use Specialist, Southern Land Office		

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

The proposed alternative has been selected and it is recommended that Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association, Inc. (TTCA, Inc.) be granted a new easement to install a new fiberoptic line on the NE¼NE¼, SE¼NE¼, NE¼SE¼, and Lot 1 of Section 16, Township 1 South, Range 14 East in Sweet Grass County.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

The potential for significant adverse impacts to the Trust land listed above is minimal due to the nature of the proposed action which would entail the issuing of the easement and installation of underground fiber optic cable. The installation and disturbance are expected to be completed in a short time-frame. The easement is located adjacent to and parallel to existing state highway that has previously been disturbed. There are no natural features that could produce adverse impacts or species of concern occupying the subject parcel that are expected to be impacted by implementing the proposed action.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

☐ EIS ☐ More Detailed EA ☒ No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	**Name:**	Jeff Bollman
	Title:	Area Manager, Southern Land Office
Signature: Jeff Bollman	**Date:**	4/17/2023

Exhibit A –Proposed Easement Section 16-T1S-R14E

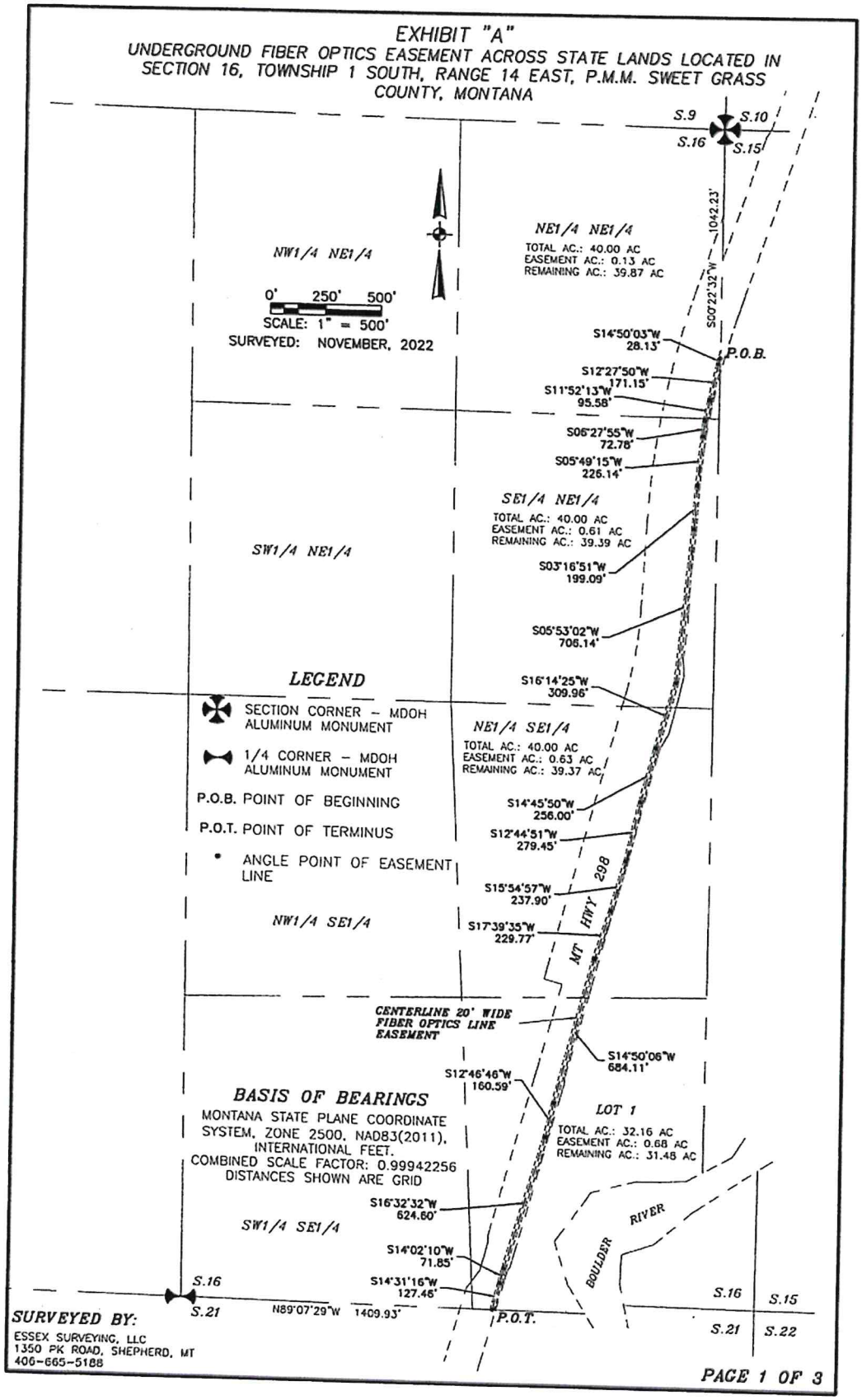


EXHIBIT "A"

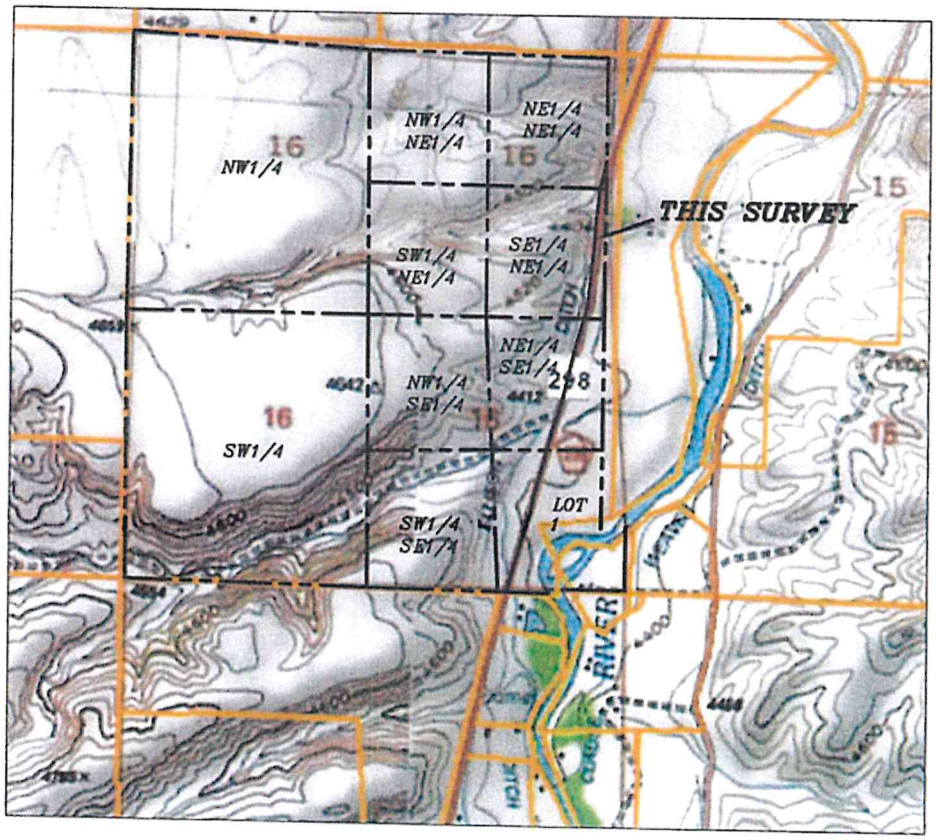
UNDERGROUND FIBER OPTICS EASEMENT ACROSS STATE LANDS LOCATED IN SECTION 16, TOWNSHIP 1 SOUTH, RANGE 14 EAST, P.M.M. SWEET GRASS COUNTY, MONTANA

0' 250' 500'
SCALE: 1" = 500'
SURVEYED: NOVEMBER, 2022

BASIS OF BEARINGS

MONTANA STATE PLANE COORDINATE SYSTEM, ZONE 2500, NAD83(2011), INTERNATIONAL FEET.
COMBINED SCALE FACTOR: 0.99942256
DISTANCES SHOWN ARE GRID

VICINITY MAP



SURVEYED BY:

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